

NOTES ON THE SEPING OF BELAGA DISTRICT, SARAWAK

Jayl Langub

Institute of East Asian Studies

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Kota Semarahan 94300

Sarawak, Malaysia

Introduction

Almost nothing has been written about the Seping except for an occasional passing mention by administrators (de Crespigny 1882; Low 1884a and 1884b; Urquhart 1955) and ethnographers (Brosius 1992; Haddon 1932; de Martinoir 1974; Nicolaisen 1977-1978; Rousseau 1973, 1974, 1990). This paper is a general description of the community. It looks at Seping history, social organization, socio-economic activities, and how the community has managed to maintain its ethnic identity in the face of increased mobility, intermarriage, rapid change, and development.

The Seping are among the few tiny ethnic minorities that have survived assimilation by bigger groups and exist today as a distinct community, keeping their cultural identity and language intact. They claim to be the first group to occupy the Belaga River region and have left their mark on the landscape as proof of that. In 1956 they lived in one longhouse comprising 16 households at Long Koyan along the middle reaches of the Belaga River. In the early 1960s a major portion of the population migrated to the Tinjar River in the Baram District; four households, however, remained at Long Koyan. After almost twenty years on the Tinjar, the group that migrated there returned to their ancestral homeland on the Belaga River. Today, the Seping comprise three longhouse settlements: Long Bala with 28 households and a population of 205, Long Koyan with 8 households and a population of 56 people, and Mile 6, Belaga-Long Urun Logging Road, 4 households and a population of 23 people. The four households at Mile 6 comprise the group that did not migrate to the Tinjar.

The 4 households at Mile 6 insist that they are Bemali, a group culturally and linguistically related to the Seping, but in reality they are offspring of mixed marriages between Bemali and Seping, or Bemali-Seping-Kejaman. The Bemali used to live as a separate community, but due to a rapid decrease in population they merged with the Seping in 1956, at the single longhouse settlement at Long Koyan. Given